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AUTHOR Jeske, Jeff
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ABSTRACT

The peer-group method of composition instruction represents the quintessence of the "environmental" mode of teaching which brings teacher, student, and materials more nearly into balance. Responding to recent criticisms of peer-response groups, a model was developed to establish a middle course, balancing (1) philosophical stances; (2) individual, group, and teacher power; (3) types of response; and (4) text-specific and general learning. The operational plan for working through a student-written paper consists of four specific stages: preparation, group editing, post-editing, and debriefing. Students develop a metacognitive awareness of their learning-in-progress and demonstrably improve their writing using this plan. Different internal capabilities are called on, exercised, intertwined, all under the scrutiny of the critical, self-aware eye. (An edit guide, agenda for group discussion, and 20 references are attached.) (RS)

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Peer-Response Groups: Answering the Critique

Jeff Jeske

As Anne Gere has demonstrated in Writing Groups: History, Theory and Implications, the use of peer groups for writing instruction has a long and storied history, dating back in this country at least to Ben Franklin. And yet I think that an argument can be made that within the continuing development of composition studies, the peer group deserves to be called a "state of the art" method.

Empirical research appears to bear out this supposition. In Research on Written Composition, for example, George Hillocks identifies 3 dominant modes of composition instruction: (1) The presentational, which is the familiar lecture and teacher-led-discussion style (Mary Rose O'Reilly has recently referred to this mode as the "missionary position" of teaching [143]). (2) The natural process, in which the teacher becomes a facilitator and there is a low level of structure -- truly a student-centered classroom. (3) The environmental, which "brings teacher, student, and materials more nearly into balance and, in effect, takes advantage of all resources of the classroom" (247). Based on meta-analysis of studies which assess these different modes, Hillocks has found the environmental to be the most effective. As I will demonstrate, the peer-group method of instruction, at least as defined here, represents a quintessence of the environmental mode, given its balancing of many pedagogical elements: hence my use of the term "state of the art".

There are four main types of peer groups employed in the writing classroom:

1. response groups
2. inquiry groups
3. collaborative writing groups
4. proofreading groups

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Considerable literature has appeared discussing these groups and how to make them work; for bibliographical surveys see Bishop, DiPardo and Freeman, Gere, and Trimbur. What I will focus on is the first of the four types, response groups. Generally used to provide peer critique of preliminary drafts of student papers, response groups are the most often utilized in the writing classroom and also the most often written about. They are also the lightning rod for proliferating critique of peer groups in general.

This critique, applied to response groups, has taken two forms. One includes practitioner reports which include criticism of one or more of the great number of different models, models ranging from one-shot oral response to super-stylized written response guided by elaborate teacher-designed tools. The second form, sometimes indirect, often involves more abstract concerns. Whichever the form, individual examples of critique can, in turn, be placed in one of three major categories:

1. philosophical

James Berlin has long reminded us that it is important for us as teachers to have our philosophical houses in order; he notes in "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," that "in teaching writing we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation within it" (766). We need to determine what our assumptions and goals are, what even our developmental theories are, and match our pedagogies appropriately. For Berlin, this means plotting one's coordinates with respect to the differing philosophies underlying composition, philosophies which he defines as those of the Neo-Aristotelians, the Positivists, the Neo-Platonists, and the New (or Epistemic) Rhetoricians. Heretofore there has been little systematic plotting with respect to peer groups.

Dipardo and Freedman extend the conversation to developmental theories,

observing that one's decisions about the types of groups one employs and the extent of group activity will vary widely depending on whether one espouses, for example, Piaget or Vygotsky, as Vygotsy places considerably greater importance on the dialectic between individual and society (133 ff.)

2. political

"Every pedagogy," Berlin observes in "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," "is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assuptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed" (492). As Mara Holt demonstrates, the dynamic of a collaborative writing group will vary significantly depending upon whether one's bias is Romantic, with a resulting focus upon the individual and either a self-actualizing or anti-establishment pedagogy, or social constructionist, with its emphasis upon the primacy of the group and its goal of recreating society. In the former orientation, which Holt chiefly identifies with Peter Elbow, authority ultimately rests with the individual; in the latter orientation, whose chief exemplar is Kenneth Bruffee, it resides in the group.

Sample questions that arise in considerations of the particular methods associated with either of the two dominant stances: What happens to authority in the so-called "parceled classroom?" First, is it desireable for a teacher to surrender authority and to what extent? Second, is power genuinely being surrendered or is the teacher only using a semblance of authority dispersal to teach a hidden curriculum (Collier 34)? And what about the power relations among the students within groups? Might not groups encourage an unhealthy dependency? And, as Carol Berkenkotter has questioned, might they not be "impinging on writer's authority over a text" (312-319)? On the other hand, to what extent is a capitalist notion of text-ownership healthy?

3. pedagogical

Perhaps most immediate to us are the pedagogical questions. Does a particular method work and to what end? Can it be construed merely as busy work designed to make the teacher's job easier? Is a monolithic revising model even desirable, given what Muriel Harris has recently shown us about the radically differing composing and revising behaviors of one- and multi-draft writers? Whose comments are superior -- the teacher's or the group's? Should this commentary be oral or written? How does one ensure accountability for the comments, accountability both of the teacher and of individual peer editors?

Diana George notes the problem of students losing what was said before they can apply the fruits of group discussion to a subsequent draft (322); how does one prevent such loss? And how does one guarantee that the lessons of a particular peer editing experience will transfer, that the student will indeed become a better, more informed self-editor in the future?

When I look at these three areas of critique, I see them as essentially, inextricably related. And I believe that the core of the relatedness inheres in sets of dual, seemingly antithetical terms which are at the core of human experience:

tree	forest
individual	society
oral	written
spontaneity	reasoned response
right brain	left brain
student	teacher
romantic	classic
process	product

When I see such lists, and arguments for or against one element or its antithesis, what I want to do immediately is fuse them. I do not think one right and the other wrong. A truly superior philosophical stance -- or political system -- or pedagogy -- must, I believe, be rooted equally in both. Thinking of the familiar right brain-left brain "opposition," for example, we realize the necessity of both hemispheres' operating in tandem.

It is for this reason that I support Hillocks' environmental method, because its bias is toward mediation -- in the case of compositional modes, between the presentational and natural process. And that is why I would like to present a model for the peer response group which, in acknowledging the recent critique, attempts to establish a middle course, based on a balancing of the following:

1. philosophic stances
2. power (among individual, group teacher)
3. types of response: structured and unstructured, reader-based and criterion-based
4. text-specific and general learning

What follows is an operational plan for the working through of a single paper by a semi-autonomous group. Concerning peer groups generally, Anne Gere has correctly noted that "there is no one `right' way to proceed" (99). Nevertheless, I have found it helpful to schematize this plan in terms of four specific stages: I. Preparation, II. Group Editing, III. Post-editing, and IV. Debriefing.

I. Preparation

I assume that a draft has already been written. There are then four tasks to this phase:

1. devising assignment-specific criteria
2. reading the drafts aloud in group

2. individuals' working at home with group drafts using an edit guide
3. modeling group work

Task 1 involves deriving standards for excellence, and doing so inductively. This is best accomplished by using a sample paper -- either student or professional -- of the type the assignment requires. The entire class can discuss the sample, or, perhaps preferably, the task can occur in groups. One excellent group strategy for deriving criteria using the papers about to be peer-edited, assuming that they are short enough, is "the read-around," an activity for which I am indebted to Jenee Gossard of the UCLA Writing Project. Because of its usefulness, I will describe this method in detail.

In the read-around, the class is divided into groups of four which are then arranged in a circle. Each group collects its own papers, which are unsigned but identified by each author's having chosen a three-digit number between 000 and 999 and written this on her paper. All groups pass their own papers clockwise to the next group to the left.

When a group receives a set of four from the neighboring group, the papers are distributed to the group members and then read and exchanged until each group member has read each of the papers the group received. A previously-chosen group leader then polls the group to determine which of the four papers the group members believe to be the strongest. The three-digit number identifying this paper is recorded and then, at a signal from the instructor, all groups forward the papers which they have read, again to the next group to the left, and the procedure is repeated.

Once each group has read the papers of all the other groups and recorded the numbers of the favorite papers from each set of four, the instructor asks a student to list on the blackboard all of the numbers which have been chosen by

the groups. Invariably, there are papers which more than one group identified as the best in a given batch, and hence numbers will repeat. The instructor pulls the papers whose numbers appear most often on the board and, after reading these aloud, asks the class to detail the elements which define those papers as superior responses to the assignment. The resulting list, again recorded on the blackboard, generally provides a full set of criteria which can then be used to guide editing.

Whether the criteria have been assembled by read-around groups or by some other method, the next step is to constellate them in a tool which a student can use for individual editing, one which she has co-created (see sample edit guide in Appendix 1). She will apply these to her peers' papers, hence engaging in the what Hillocks calls "scales," an activity which his meta-analysis cites as one of the most effective techniques for improving writing, twice as effective, for example, as free-writing techniques (249).

Karen Spear has noted an essential problem with edit guides, namely that they "interfere with writing as process, and they ask students to assume the reading stance of the writing teacher" (50); DiPardo and Freeman thereby observe that such tools, by forcing students to attend closely to teacherly concerns, may actually cancel the technique's alleged benefit of providing a student-author with a wider audience, and that the use of peer groups may thus involve "little more than pursuing a traditional teacher-centered agenda within a parceled class" (127).

Nevertheless, available research demonstrates that beginning college writers are generally not equipped by their reading habits and experience to be effective critical readers of student texts (Spear 29-38). Some form of guidance is necessary. I think the problem noted above can be partially resolved by having the students participate in the making of the edit guide.

Further, it is possible to balance the edit guide's focus so that the student reader's authority is maintained and even celebrated. Peter Elbow's distinction between reader-based and criterion-based feedback (240-251) is valuable here. The greater the emphasis upon reader-based feedback, the less likelihood that students will function simply as teacher surrogates.

The individual students work with their group's papers at home, spending a minimum of 30-45 minutes providing written commentary in the margins and composing final notes to each author. Beforehand, however, they will have participated in the second task of the preparation sequence, which is reading the papers aloud in group, so that the group members can experience them fresh and in the author's own voice, with no response expected except for praise. It will be the subsequent at-home work which will thoroughly verse them in the text, thus facilitating detailed discussion when the groups reconvene.

The final step in the preparation stage involves actual training in the mechanics of productive group discussion. Occurring after the group members have completed their at-home editing, this training can take a couple of different forms, distinguished by the degree of teacherly authority. Whatever the method chosen, the fact of there being a significant training component is essential. In Focus on Collaborative Learning, Jeff Golub rightly stresses that "in order to be motivated to achieve a productive group experience, students need to understand exactly what they are being asked to do, how they should go about doing it, when the assignment is to be completed, and what the individual benefits are" (24). The available literature generally identifies the training component as the most important determinant of whether the response group succeeds or fails.

The most inductive, student-centered training technique is the trial

run-through without leaders. In this method, the instructor does no more than write a prompt for group discussion on the board and then leave the room. After a specified period she returns and the groups evaulate what happened in their discussions, deriving a set of directives on how the procedure should run in order to be more effective (Book & Galvin 20). Another technique is the "fishbowl discussion," in which one group volunteers to discuss a paper in front of the class, followed by a general critique of the discussion's effectiveness. An alternate method, still in the fishbowl, is the "triad," in which three people participate -- the author, an editor, and a commentator on their interaction (Jacko 1-9). Finally, it is also possible for a teacher to herself demonstrate techniques of response.

Whichever method is used, the goal is to teach students how to discuss a paper thoroughly. I find the following pair of objectives to be uppermost:

1. to know how to praise what is praiseworthy, so as to enforce positive writing behavior. I insist that this be the first step in the procedure. Always.

2. to be able to discriminate between higher- and lower-order concerns and to be able to allocate the available time so that these are discussed proportionally.

II. Group Editing

The second stage in the process is the actual group discussion, a sharing and synthesizing of the observations made by the peer editors in the course of their individual, at-home edits. This procedure, following the modeled group interaction, features two elements whose purpose is to highlight criteria and meaningful learning.

The first element is an agenda (Appendix 2) which can be prepared either by the group or by the teacher -- if by the latter, however, it should confine

itself to loose-fitting instructions which echo what has been inductively derived by the class members in the course of the at-home editing (prior to the group discussion, the teacher or a designated student can lead a discussion of what the individual editors found, in their applying of edit guide criteria to the actual tissue of individual papers, to be those elements which most need to be focused on in group discussion). An agenda has the advantage of keeping the group's discussion focused. It also reinforces the importance of specific criteria by restating them, and thereby helps individual students to internalize them.

The second element is a summation by the designated group leader at the end of the discussion of each individual paper, to insure that the group's comments are highlighted both for the author and for the other editors, and in a way which focuses attention yet again on the general criteria. The leader functions as group spokesperson, articulating what the group has learned, through its discussion, about good writing.

III. Post-editing

At the end of the class hour, the drafts are returned to the authors for revision. This activity initiates stage three -- Post-Editing. There are five tasks here, all of which have the purposes of raising meta-cognitive awareness -- that is, conscious reflection on the process of learning -- and then having the student apply what has been learned, first in the revision of the paper, and secondly with the editing activity which will follow in subsequent paper assignments. The tasks:

1. The student writes a 2-3 page journal entry which responds to his peers' comments. A loose organizing principle should be the division of the commentary into higher-order and lower-order concerns.

2. The student revises the paper.
3. The student evaluates his editors, submitting to the teacher written comments and/or numerical scores for each editor (for example, two separate scores on a scale of one to ten, one for the quantity and the other for the quality of the feedback).
4. The student writes notes to each of his editors in which he assesses their feedback more specifically, this time with the goal of helping his peers to edit better (at the beginning of the semester, I always have groups stay together for the first two paper assignments so that the group members can consciously participate in their mutual development as editors).
5. The groups re-assemble to read their revised drafts aloud, thereby providing concrete examples of the effects of revision and the importance of peer input. The students may also articulate for each other what they learned about their writing in the revision process.
6. The students submit the revised papers for reading and further commentary by the teacher, whose chief function now is that of professional editor, a reader whose training well-equips her to represent and articulate the expectations of the educated community, as well as to advise the author on specific ways of bringing the finished product further into line with those expectations.

IV. Debriefing

The fourth stage consists of three further activities. The first is a class discussion/evaluation of the peer-editing process which has just been performed, the goal being to articulate what worked and what did not, with an

eye toward the next paper's round of editing. One important function at the beginning of the term is to distill suggested solutions for the problems which individual groups faced, given that these groups will work together again.

The second debriefing task involves the class members in discussing what they learned as individuals about their writing. This conversation best follows a journal entry in which each student addresses this issue for herself. It is important to re-emphasize the integrity of the individual's growth, even while that integrity is defined within a context of community learning. Meta-cognitive awareness expands, too, as individual students compare their growth process with others'.

In the third debriefing task, the teacher, again functioning as super-editor, one who can use her greater expertise to move the individual writers along another major step, meets with the groups to discuss the papers which she has now read and commented on, defines a grade level for each paper by applying the assignment-specific criteria of edit guide and agendas as well as the more general grading criteria defined in the syllabus, and suggests further revision. This meeting also ensures a certain degree of accountability, as the teacher must objectify his grade/response in terms of the published criteria. A useful analogue of the teacher's role in this stage is as that of a respondent at a panel of papers. A summing up and a synthesis occur, and a placing of the prior activities in the larger context of the group's collective development as a community of individual writers.

I will end the procedure at this point, although it should be evident how one could extrapolate another round of group activity from it. The principles governing the further activity would be identical to those presented above.

Conclusion

It may be objected that the extent of teacherly design in this model ill-equips it to exemplify environmental balance, that it does not reflect the reapportionment of power and the polycentralization which Kenneth Bruffee places at collaborative learning's core (637). I side with Karen Spear, however, when she points to the importance of sound structuring and guidance in group work (8), and I regard the teacher-as-structurer as part of yet one more balanced pair in the tao of instruction.

As structurer, the teacher embodies what we have come to associate with left hemisphericity: abilities at analysis, logic, and sequence, and a mindfulness of convention. Form. The community. On the other hand, our first-year students come to us to develop what are yet-latent abilities in these categories, at least latent regarding what we could consider their operation at the college or university level. On the other hand, we hope that they bring with them already established energies which we can label holistic, metaphorical, intuitive. If not, it is our mission to help tap them.

What we seek is a mode of intellectual androgyny whereby a student can generate the logical, coherent sequences which the majority of the writing situations of college and work life demand and infuse what are often conventional structures with power, surprise and an individual voice: or, alternatively, where the student can draw on holistic and metaphorical understandings to critique or explode convention when appropriate or necessary.

Such androgyny occupies, with respect to the critique of peer response groups, a philosophical middle ground. In terms of James Berlin's earlier, four-fold categorization, it mediates between Platonism and Aristotelianism as well as between classic and Romantic and old and New Rhetoric, drawing on all of these bodies of thought, oriented as each is to differing epistemologies,

depending on which -ism facilitates a present focus of instruction. When focusing on the individual and the hot magma of his/her unique contributions, I think like a Platonist, a Romantic, or perhaps a New Rhetorician; when on the group and established codes, I am likely to draw on the assumptions of Aristotle or the Positivists. A philosophical environmentalism. Wave and particle. Ultimately, I believe the teacher can and should model -- in a loose structure of combination -- the wholeness which the inter-permeability of different belief systems makes possible. Such modeling is, I believe, necessary, for students do not bring this wholeness, predicated as it is on openness to combination, with them when they arrive at our doors. They certainly lack the kind of critical inquiry which can lead to balanced antitheses. Such inquiry is what the teacher, wearing her teacher-as-structurer hat, enables, because the structure presented is a structure for critical inquiry.

The teacher-student partnership requires a careful political balancing as well. In the context of the second set of Berlin's terms, it means the plotting of a course among cognitive, expressionistic, and social-epistemic ideologies, a combining of the critical sensibility derived from the social-epistemic with a loving awareness of the competing demands of individual (expressionistic) and group/society (as expressed in the cognitive emphasis on established structures). In this plotting, the teacher is a leader, and thereby an initiator into established structure -- i.e., a structured model of group assessment -- but the leadership is that of guide rather than autocrat, as she creates situations in which the students can generate the stuff of the structures themselves, such that the peer-response process, as John Trimbur notes of collaborative learning generally, "actively involves the participants in their own learning" (87). What eventuates for the teacher is not exactly the "withering away" called for by Ira Shor (xii), but rather a progressive

receding into what is, in this pedagogical situation, a most appropriate role -- that of Editor, defined here as the reader for and representative of the educated community, one whose understanding of reader expectation and writer need has been well- honed through years of professional experience.

With respect to pedagogy, my goal with peer response groups is also shaped by environmental principles. I believe that unstructured oral response works and that structured written response works, that reader-based feedback unlocks student ability to express individual perceptions and that criterion-based feedback facilitates the individual editor's himself becoming a better writer. I know that there is a time for having edit guides and a time for not having edit guides. It is possible and desirable to harness all of these elements within the same process. Most important of all, I see the over-arching importance of meta-cognitive awareness, of the student's constant articulation of her learning in progress and of the principles that guide that learning; this proliferating awareness appears to benefit all students, whether they are one- or multi-draft writers by constitution.

I would wager that it is this awareness, along with the demonstrable improvement in writing ability which peer-editing brings, which explains why students regularly report group work to be the most effective aspect of my writing course, whether this course be freshman or advanced, disciplinary or across-the-curriculum. Different internal capabilities are called on, exercised, intertwined, all under the scrutiny of the critical, self-aware eye. This creative melange is a good. It ranks with other, larger, benefits -- the gains in cooperation, in empathy, in the ability to share perceptions of common problems, in the ability, so necessary today, to communicate across the boundaries of disciplinary and even intradisciplinary specialization, and in the appreciation of the rich variety of intellectual and emotional experience

within any group, itself an essential balancing. All of these, despite the inevitable and valuable critique of peer-response-group theory and praxis, make this strategy, for my money, one of the best available for teaching writing.

Appendix 1

Edit Guide -- Argument

This document should help you respond to your group-mates' drafts. In it are questions to ask yourself which are derived from the lists we made of the elements comprising a superior argument-with-concession paper.

I'm expecting that you will spend 30 to 45 minutes on each paper, providing a minimum of 200 words of commentary. The goal is to provide honest, insightful reader response, thus helping the writer to improve the paper in a subsequent draft. The response can take two chief forms (I'm indebted for both terminology and distinctions to Peter Elbow's Writing with Power):

(1) Reader-based, which provides raw data about the effect the writing has on you, moment by moment, as you read it (e.g., "I like the opening paragraph -- really grabs me!", "terrific point . . . I seem to need a little more proof, though, in order to be totally convinced," "I felt myself getting lost here . . .," "what a vivid image! explodes colors in my mind").

(2) Criterion-based, which helps the writer see where s/he is performing excellently with respect to -- or running afoul of -- those objective criteria used to judge expository and argumentative writing.

1. Read the paper through at least twice -- the first time to get an overview and to register the effects the writing has on you, the second time slowly and with pen in hand. During the second read, clarify your general impressions (how you react or fail to react to the piece) and in the margins or the text itself, jot your reader-based and criterion-based responses.

In general, consider your function to be less that of editor or proofreader and more that of intelligent, sensitive reader.

Some content and structure suggestions:

-- do you have any suggestions for reconceptualizing the whole approach?

are there alternate perspectives which the writer should consider interfusing?

-- is the title interesting in its own right? does it arouse curiosity . . . set the voice . . . point the direction?

-- is the introduction clear, interesting, and informative? how motivated are you to keep reading? is there a thesis or some sort of indirect device which cues you to the paper's focus?

-- is the focus maintained throughout the paper?

-- does the author provide emphatic bridges between the major portions of the argument structure?

-- are generalizations supported? does the author provide warrant as well as data? are the examples appropriate and as concrete as they need to be?

-- does the conclusion get the argument in sharp focus? does it have emotional impact? does it resonate with the argument's larger significance?

Some style questions:

-- what about the paper's ethos? what does it inspire in you?

-- does the voice sound like that of a living, breathing person? is the voice appropriate to the argument?

-- are there any spots where the sentences seem too choppy or cumbersome?

-- are there any distracting grammatical errors (e.g., run-ons, fragments, agreement problems, misused semi-colons, spelling glitches)?

-- any ambiguity, mistaken nuance, made-up words, inappropriate slang or jargon?

-- which individual word choices pleased you the most?

-- do you find the unpredictability and surprise which we've found to characterize the highest quality papers?

2. Write a fairly detailed note to the author.

Begin by explaining to the author what you think his or her main purpose or idea is.

-- if your interpretation is close to the author's intention, you've immediately established your credentials as a sensitive reader, and your criticism is likely to be considered attentively.

-- if it turns out that you've gathered from the essay opinions, ideas, and/or purposes that the author feels are not what he or she set out to do, that sets the stage for a dialogue betwwen you which aims at discovering where the writing or the reading went astray.

Then make a general evaluation of the paper, considering the following areas:

(1) what's good in the essay

(2) what's weak

(3) how the essay can be improved

Note: in past classes, the students who receive the highest editing evaluations from their peers have usually been the bluntest and most thorough critics. Serious writers are more grateful for honest, constructive criticism than for empty compliments, and they instinctively respect the reader who is committed to high standards. You'll see this yourself in the weeks ahead.

At the same time . . . be lavish with your praise when it's deserved. Exercise empathy (how would you respond to your criticism?). Be a friend.

Appendix 2

Agenda for Group Discussion

Argument Paper

Following are the items which the class decided most deserved attention after at-home editing. Your group can use this informal agenda or one of your own for today's in-class discussion.

1. What has the author done especially well?
   -- organizing material
   -- language (especially, figurative language)
   -- surprise
   -- teaching something new
2. Introduction: to what degree does it engage the reader?
3. Lay-out of argument: Effective? Opponent's position state fairly? Author's arguments well-supported?
4. Emphatic bridges between major essay sections?
5. Authoritative ethos?
6. Conclusion: does it galvanize us?
7. If there's time:
   -- look at the paper's verbs. Are they deliciously varied? Passive only when necessary? Strong where appropriate? Pick them out of the paragraphs and inspect them as a group.

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